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ABSTRACT

The first section of this paper discusses the sentence combining approach to teaching writing and includes illustrations of sentence combining problems. The second section describes a program in which the sentence combining approach was used with low ability seventh graders in an inner-city junior high school. Among the benefits of the program were that student compositions improved in quality and in length, that students enjoyed the program and felt successful in it, and that students' handwriting, mechanical skills, and grammar improved in many cases. The third section of the paper notes that low ability students are often not taught to write and urges that such students be given the right to write. It points out that, when students are taught sentence combining, they also learn reading comprehension and thinking processes and are helped to expand on their thoughts in their writing. (GW)

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# Using Sentence Combining to Teach Writing to Inner-City Students

Edgar H. Schuster

We have been experimenting with sentence-combining techniques in various classes in grades 7, 8, and 9 over a three-year period. As I speak, I will make references to some of these experiments, but for the most part I will be speaking today about research that we did last year with three classes of seventh-grade children in an inner-city junior high school. The average verbal IQ of these children was 86, and though I have not personally checked their reading scores, I am told by their teachers that on the average they read at about the second or third grade level.

My presentation will be in three parts. First, I would like to talk a little about the sentence-combining approach that we use. I will also give you some handouts and ask you to do some problems on your own. Secondly, I would like to comment on the benefits of the program as revealed through our formal and informal research. Finally, I will discuss briefly why it is important to teach these kids to write, why I think they have a right to write as well as a right to read.

## THE SENTENCE-COMBINING APPROACH TO TEACHING WRITING

Those of you who may be interested in the history of sentence combining should consult Frank O'Hare's booklet entitled Sentence Combining, published by the NCTE in 1973. The same pamphlet describes O'Hare's original research with 7th graders. O'Hare is also the author of the paperback text, Sentence-craft, published by Ginn in 1975. We have used that book with good success at the ninth-grade level with average and above-average kids. In fact, it was our success with this text that prompted me to write my own materials

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specifically for younger and less talented students. But let me give those of you who may be unfamiliar with the approach some samples. The first sheet you have is an overview of the three main signals that are used in writing sentence-combining problems. At the bottom of the page is a single problem employing all three signals.

The second handout is an illustration of a discourse sentence-combining problem. These are used in our program after every six lessons.

Now in teaching students through this approach, we do not give them the first sheet I gave you. Instead, we focus on a single structure and provide many examples of it. For instance, on a given day we might deal with the writing of appositives, as in the second example on the first handout. We would do a sample problem or two, and then let the students do 8 or 10 on their own. When they have finished, individual students are asked to read their sentences aloud, andthe class is invited to discuss and sometimes vote on whether the student has produced a good English sentence. It is O'Hare's suggestion that if the majority of the class decides that a given sentence is good, it is good--even if the teacher doesn't think so. I've always liked this suggestion, since in the long run no one is going to be holding the student's hand when he writes sentences in real life. But I really wondered how this would work in classes with very low ability students.

It turns out that it works just fine. True, these kids write many

The basic idea of the program is to combine sets of short sentences into longer sentences. In order to do this, one has to become familiar with three sentence-combining signals.

1. The parentheses signal. When something appears in the parentheses at the end of a sentence, use it at the beginning of that line. After you have it there, write the two sentences as one. Always write the first sentence first.

   I haven't seen her.
   She was a little girl. (since)

   _____

2. The underlining signal. When something is underlined, use only that part of that sentence. Throw away the rest of the sentence. Then put the underlined words in the best place in the previous sentence. IMPORTANT: Never add any words unless they are shown in parentheses at the end of a sentence.

   Mr. Jones was shouting.
   Mr. Jones was our football coach.

   _____

3. The SOMETHING signal. When you see the word "something" printed in capital letters, it means "put something else in this place." You first take out SOMETHING. Then you put in its place whatever you find in the next line.

   Alice said SOMETHING.
   She knew the answer.

   _____

Now try the following complex sentence-combining problem:

   Marcie realized SOMETHING.
   She was supposed to like Walt Whitman. (that)
   Walt Whitman was the famous American poet.
   She hated him. (, but)

   _____

   _____

# WRITING A STORY

You can write part of a story about a famous American Indian athlete by doing the sentence-combining problems below. For each problem, write your sentence on your paper. Then write the next sentence right after it. (Paragraph where necessary.)

1. Jim Thorpe spent his early years fishing.
   Jim Thorpe was an American Indian. (, ... ,)
   He spent his early years hunting. (,)
   He spent his early years swimming. (, and)
   There were few schools for Indians. (because)
   He was young. (when)

2. He spent years in physical activities. (because)
   His body became strong. (,)
   His body became hard. (and)
   He learned to run and jump like a deer. (, and)

3. Jim grew older, however. (as)
   He began to realize SOMETHING.
   Education was also important. (that)

4. Fortunately, many people felt SOMETHING.
   Indians should be able to go to school. (that)
   Indians wanted an education. (who)
   These people started schools for Indians. (, and)

5. Jim Thorpe got his chance.
   He got his chance for an education.
   They opened an Indian school. (when)
   They opened it in Carlyle, Pennsylvania.
   He lived there. (where)

6. He learned to read. (although)
   He learned to write. (and)
   Jim always loved sports best.
   He became a star. (; and)
   He became a star in five sports.
   He was still in school. (while)

more ungrammatical sentences than brighter kids do. But when they read their sentences aloud, they recognize ungrammaticality nearly as readily as any other students. Even the student who wrote the ungrammatical sentence recognizes it as such--most of the time--almost as soon as he reads it. At any rate, our experience has been that the majority rarely errs in judging grammaticality.

Before going on to the next topic, I should mention that in our program every third lesson is called "On Your Own." In these lessons, students combine two or more sentences without benefit of signals. The program, then, is not quite as mechanical as it might seem from the handouts I have given you.

THE BENEFITS OF THE PROGRAM

The chief benefit of any sentence-combining program is supposed to be that the students learn to write maturer sentences. This hypothesis has been confirmed by a number of experiments, and I am not here to dispute it. I should confess, however, that our gains have not been as dramatic as some other researchers have found. We have had gains and we have been pleased with them. We think that possibly one reason for their relative modesty is that we have used teachers who have had no training in either sentence-combining methods or in transformational grammar. Another reason might be that the maximum amount of time spent with any class in the course of a year has been about 45 hours (that represents a combination of class time and homework time).

But though the sentence maturity indices have not leaped dramatically,

we have had excellent results in overall writing quality. We have judged this by having students write themes pre- and post-experimentally and having 12th grade teachers make holistic judgments of the quality of these themes without knowing which was written before and which after instruction. The first time we tried this was after students had had a very brief exposure to sentence combining, and frankly, I would have been pleased if the teachers had picked the post-experimental essays as the better even 55% of the time. What happened is that they picked them 74.2% of the time.

Then last year we did the same with two control classes taught conventionally by one of the best teachers in the entire district and one experimental class taught by a brand new teacher and--about once a week--by me. The control classes met first and fifth periods; the experimental met the last period of the day. The control classes did a good deal of writing through the year; the experimental class wrote only what they had to write in the sentence-combining sessions. The results in the control classes were excellent, as I thought they would be, given the competence and conscientiousness of their teacher--79% of the time, the second essay was judged to be better than the first. But in the experimental class, the figure was 100%.

We have also checked out length of pre- and post-experimental compositions. In the experiment I have just mentioned, the length of end-of-year compositions in the control group was 117 words; in the experimental group it was 174 words. Naturally, both groups wrote on the same topic and were given the same amount of time. I attribute

this difference to an increase in what might be called "writing self-confidence."

Having mentioned that term, I must add the observation that sentence combining is something that these kids love to do. I think they love to do it, in part, because they can do it, because they experience a kind of success that they normally do not experience in their English classes. Now we all know how good it feels to be successful, but put yourself in the shoes of kids who rarely have that feeling and test how good you feel.

In school at least most of these children may be described as "success-deprived" and just how deep that feeling goes is hard to measure. If we can believe the psychiatrist, Erik Erikson, however, it must go very deep indeed. In his work on identity, Erikson says that the pre-adolescent's sense of identity may be expressed by the phrase, "I am what I can learn to make work." Generally speaking, these students do not seem to be able to make anything work--in school. If "I" can make nothing work, does it follow that "I" am nothing? I fear it may.

There are still other benefits of the program. For example, some teachers have reported an improvement in handwriting. We have also seen improvements in some mechanical skills such as beginning sentences with capital letters and spelling. And finally we build written usage items into our program in the hope that students' usage habits will improve. We have not done much to measure these improvements, but many teachers have reported seeing them. They certainly should not come as a surprise, for in a program like this, students write hundreds [redacted] more

sentences than they would normally. Ask yourself if it is not true that in your school system the amount of writing required of students varies directly with their IQ. In my experience mentally gifted students are asked to write all the time; kids at the other end of the scale are practically never asked to write.

THE RIGHT TO WRITE

This brings me to the last of my topics, which I could sum up succinctly in the phrase, "the right to write." We often do not teach low ability children to write at all on the ground either that they cannot be taught to write in the first place or that they will never use the skill as adults. I hope I have already demonstrated that the first argument is unfounded. They can be taught to write. What about the argument that they will never use writing?

The first thing I would say about this is <u>how do we know</u> they'll never use it? Or, better yet, by what right do we make this assumption and thereby deny them a skill that we routinely teach to others? To say that they will never write as adults is prejudicial, undemocratic, and inhumane.

But there is another dimension involved here as well. It hangs on the matter of what it is that we teach when we teach writing. This in turn depends upon how we teach writing. If we teach writing in such a way as to cause students to become aware of and to use the rich syntatic resources of their language, I would argue that we teach a good deal more than a utilitarian skill.

We teach reading comprehension, for one thing. It is hardly possible for students to go through a sentence-combining program without also learning to grasp more quickly the syntax of what they read and thus become better readers. If you've ever struggled to comprehend a difficult poem, you know how great a role knowing the syntax plays in reading comprehension. You can't get the meaning unless you know the syntax. It could hardly be otherwise for a seventh grader. If you are interested in this aspect of sentence combining, I strongly recommend that you read the article by Sandra L. Stotsky in Research in the Teaching of English, Spring, 1975.

Secondly, I believe that when we teach writing this way we teach thinking. This can be proved by introspection. Just imagine yourself trying to think in simple sentences only, or in simple sentences linked only by "and's," "so's," and "then's." We sometimes call these kids "slow learners." Is it possible that they are slow precisely because this is what they are doing, the way they are thinking? If we don't help them to learn and use more linguistic resources, we may be in a sense condemning them to think slowly.

I once observed a sixth-grade teacher who had written on the board a number of sentences drawn from his students' compositions. He invited the kids to say what was wrong with each sentence. (Incidentally, do we ever write the students' best sentences on the board and invite them to say what is elegant about them?) It was clear to me what was wrong with the first three sentences, but stare as I did for a long time at the fourth,

I could find nothing wrong with it. On the contrary, it was a surprisingly mature sentence for any sixth grader to have written, with an appositive and a participial phrase nicely embedded in its structure. I couldn't wait till the teacher got to the sentence, for it was clear that I was about to learn something as well as his students.

It turned out, however, that what was wrong with that elegant, smoothly flowing structure was that it should have been three sentences instead of one! I cried inside as I watched the students--perhaps one of them was the author--nod in agreement as their "teacher" sliced that long and lovely living dragon into three lifeless stumps.

Everything in sentence combining goes in just the opposite direction from this teacher, goes in the direction of blooming. Sure, there is some danger of excess. We once had a girl who wrote a 280 word theme with only three sentences in it. But this is the same kind of excess that we see in the writing of students who are just coming to love words and who use them, for a while, wildly and wrongly. There's plenty of time to correct such excesses later. Far, far sorrier is the child who does not even have the possibility of allowing his thoughts to bloom.

Much has been done in recent years in the name of the right to read; it is time we started addressing ourselves to the right to write.

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